

Wisconsin's Early Childhood Reform Agenda: Race to the Top Early Learning Challenge Grant Background

The Race to the Top – Early Learning Challenge (RTTT-ELC) grant from the U.S. Department of Education and Health and Human Services provides Wisconsin with an opportunity to apply for \$60 million. Funds would be available over five years to create high-quality, comprehensive early learning and development systems and build a more unified approach to supporting young children and their families. The highly competitive grant is exclusively focused on promoting school readiness for children with high needs. The application is due October 19, 2011 with funding announcements to be made by December 30, 2011. This document provides background on Wisconsin's application as information for key stakeholders.

The application builds on the solid foundation created with establishment of the Governor's Early Childhood Advisory Council in 2008 and their initial charge to develop a comprehensive, sustainable early childhood system so that every child is healthy, nurtured, safe and successful. The foundation for the Council was established in 1990 with the ongoing work of the Wisconsin Early Childhood Collaborating Partners and the Professional Development Initiative. The Council is comprised of key leaders in early learning, education, health, child welfare, mental health, government, businesses, advocacy, and higher education. It has served as a key vehicle for securing public input from the early childhood community across the state.

Based on the 2010 needs assessment conducted by Katherine Magnuson, Ph.D., UW-Madison Institute for Research on Poverty, for the Council, a key group of recommendations were made that include: *developing an early childhood longitudinal data system*, in coordination with the Department of Public Instruction, to better understand and track young children across programs; *expanding evidence-based home visiting programs* to better engage and support families; *developing a comprehensive screening and assessment system* for young children, including a Kindergarten assessment; *enhancing professional development* to ensure a quality early care workforce; and *exploring the feasibility of infrastructure models*, including a public/private partnership, that leverage existing funding and engage the business community.

Wisconsin's Early Childhood Reform Agenda: Race to the Top Early Learning Challenge Grant Application Overview

Wisconsin believes that children should enter school at kindergarten ready to succeed. We believe that our reform agenda as advanced by this application opportunity will help our state best prepare children for kindergarten success.

I. Wisconsin's Strong Commitment to Early Learning and Development

Wisconsin's reform agenda for its RTTT-ELC application builds on current strengths and investments that ensure children's success.

- Wisconsin invested early and significantly to ensure that high needs children have access to quality early learning and development programs, through its pre-Kindergarten (Wisconsin's four-year-old Kindergarten-4K) programs, Head Start state supplement; commitments to programs serving children with disabilities; and policies in its child care subsidy program to ensure access to those who need subsidized, quality care.
- Wisconsin developed comprehensive model Early Learning Standards aligned with K-12 academic standards and inclusive of the five key domains of school readiness. These standards inform best practices in curriculum and assessment and guided the development of the state's quality rating and improvement system; they are also used to inform professional development strategies.
- Wisconsin launched a tiered quality rating and improvement system (QRIS), required all subsidy child care programs to participate and invested in training and technical assistance aimed at moving providers to higher levels of quality, as well as an evaluation to validate the impact of its quality levels on child outcomes and in.
- Wisconsin invested in a longitudinal data system for children and youth K-16 to inform progress on measurable objectives. The state has also invested in a variety of program-specific early childhood data sets that, taken together, allow us to improve services and policies related to key child outcomes.

Wisconsin is well positioned to build on these investments to improve the quality and performance of its early learning and development programs; to ensure that high needs children have access to and receive evidence-based services to build a solid foundation for future learning and subsequently reduce the state's achievement gap.

II. Reform Agenda Aligns with ECAC Recommendations

Wisconsin's reform agenda is aligned with the goals and objectives of the ECAC, and its specific recommendations to:

- ✓ Create a comprehensive screening and assessment system
- ✓ Create a longitudinal data system
- ✓ Develop an effective public-private infrastructure to support early learning and development
- ✓ Build on and coordinate existing professional development structures to create a statewide early childhood professional development system
- ✓ Support families and communities

III. Wisconsin's Reform Agenda: Children Enter School Ready to Succeed

The following strategies are proposed to advance Wisconsin's agenda to ensure children enter school ready to succeed:

A. Pilot and implement a kindergarten entry assessment (KEA) that is complementary to the recommendations of the Governor's Read to Lead Task Force and addresses the five domains of school readiness. Kindergarten assessments that provide information across all domains of early learning and development will help inform efforts to close the school readiness gap, and to inform instructional practices in early elementary grades.

B. Fast track expansion of the state's longitudinal data system to include early childhood data.

Collecting, organizing and understanding evidence of young children's progress is essential to ensuring that early learning and development programs are of high quality and that they meet the needs of every child. Data will be drawn from existing state and local data sets thus allowing for improved instruction, practices, services and policies to ensure school readiness and reduce the achievement gap. Ultimately, this linked system will allow for the longitudinal evaluation of children's progress from early childhood through higher education.

C. Improve access to QRIS-participating quality early childhood programs for high needs children through targeted technical assistance and other activities that increase the availability of high quality programs to high needs children. To close the school readiness gap, we need to ensure that children with high needs have access to and participate in high quality early learning and development programs. Targeted populations include children living in rural areas, tribes, high poverty school districts, and foster care, and children with disabilities.

D. Strengthen family engagement and parent support strategies to better support school readiness by ensuring the use of evidence-based family engagement standards in the QRIS and aligning standards across early learning and development programs; providing training and technical assistance to early childhood program providers on effective family engagement and parent support strategies; and targeting technical assistance to programs that serve children with high needs. We know that school readiness outcomes for children improve when families are engaged in and support children's development. We want to ensure that the practices used in our early learning and development programs are effective and consistent with emerging research on linguistic and cultural competence.

E. Implement an effective professional development system within a knowledge and competency framework that builds the skills and competencies of early childhood program providers and allows for career advancement through a progressive credentialing process. Ensuring that children are ready for success at kindergarten depends on the availability of well trained adults who have acquired the necessary knowledge, skills and abilities to effectively support the learning and development of every child. We want to ensure that adults working in early learning and development programs are well-trained and supported in their professional development.